



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Frenzy by Alfred Hitchcock
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Le Boucher is a radical departure: the first of Chabrol's films to treat its characters with compassion, love, and understanding rather than with irony, contempt, or disgust. The human folly which before seemed no more than the oddities of this or that class or milieu now is seen as the human predicament itself; what before was material for melodrama, farce, and black humor is now material for tragedy. We can see that the obsessions of *Le Boucher* are in many ways those of the earlier films, but the treatment has changed. There are obvious points of comparison, for example, between Paul in *Le Boucher* and André, the motorcyclist of *Les bonnes femmes*, who is obsessed with women's necks—who charms women, then takes them into the woods, only to strangle them. But in *Les bonnes femmes*, this was a kind of sick joke. Chabrol was laughing—and asking us to laugh—at Jacqueline, who thinks André is the Mr. Right she has been dreaming of and who gets murdered by him; at all the shop girls for the banality of their lives and the stupidity of their aspirations; their stupidity in even *having* aspirations; and at André himself, who was no more than a grotesque. This is playing it safe, a way of dissociating oneself from one's obsessions because one is afraid of them. It is quite another thing to implicate oneself in one's obsessions: to try to feel what it's like to be a pathological murderer and to experience his sufferings and longings—or what it's like to care about such a person, to feel affection and gratitude toward him and at the same time fear and horror of him.

For Chabrol, *Le Boucher* is a prodigious leap to a new plane of artistic consciousness. It allows us to look back on the earlier films—failures and shallow successes, artistic and commercial efforts alike—as learning and preparation for this, his first serious, honest film. But it is more than that. By the grace and understanding with which it represents fundamental aspects of human experience, by its power to resonate and to disturb us, to make us feel and reflect upon what is has shown us, it stands among the rare masterpieces of the film medium.

—PAUL WARSHOW

FRENZY

Producer-Director: Alfred Hitchcock. Script: Anthony Shaffer. Photography: Gill Taylor. Music: Ron Goodwin.

In the past decade, the most serious charge against the work of Alfred Hitchcock has been that of *dullness*, that absence of suspense in the simplest cinematic translation, that lack of surprise and malevolent wit that characterized the unforgettable twists of terror in *Psycho*. If Hitchcock's temporary "decline" in the genre of suspense films outraged his audiences, his followers never really deserted him; the spectators held on patiently throughout *The Birds*, praising its moments of excitement and ignoring the missed opportunities to make it something totally extraordinary. With *Marnie*, the lack of a strong feminine personality threw the entire film off-balance, one might say, and Sean Connery's Bondian image did not transfer its charm into a milieu hitherto reserved for such screen stalwarts as Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman. The problem of casting seemed to overwhelm the master as well as a propensity for hoping that the actors would vivify the sluggishness of such scripts as *The Torn Curtain* and the incredibly lifeless *Topaz*. The masterful cameo role of a pathetic expatriate, exquisitely played by Lila Kedrova, remains the shining episode in *Torn Curtain*, and the harrowing depiction of the awkward procedure of killing a human being by thrusting his head into a gas oven, or a suspenseful bus ride across hostile borders—these were almost lost because of the incongruous presence of Paul Newman and Julie Andrews. Hitchcock should always be aware that time is meaningless to his legion of admirers throughout the world and the Gaumont-British days are as alive as ever. There was an odd period in American cinema when it was felt that Newman's abilities could encompass the demeanor of Nobel prize-winners, in either literature or science, but alas, this was a misguided assumption. In the cinema of today, there are limits to the acceptance of fantasy, and one would trade a million glamor-stars for the Hitchcockian verisimilitudes of some contemporary Donats, Pilbeams, De Marneys, Ashcrofts and Lorres. It was extremely difficult to imagine Miss Andrews behind the

Iron Curtain for any reason whatsoever, whereas Madeleine Carroll or Anny Ondra would have delineated every nuance of chic, feminine distress with their usual blonde aplomb. Would any Hitchcock scholar or devotee deny that the only memorable moment in *Topaz* is the image of Karin Dor, sinking floorward in a mortal swoon, engulfed in billows of a purple gown? Besides, *Topaz* was peopled with a cast of neozombies of fairly familiar appearance only to those who had managed to see a number of dreadful "international" features, and even the original ending of the film (a duel in a deserted stadium) failed to bring this oddity to life. One became alarmed that the promise of *Psycho* had somehow led to the elephantine, torpid, almost somnolent *Topaz*. Although the French, not having to listen to the dialogue too carefully, found *Topaz* to be a work of merit, it must be stated emphatically that, compared to *Topaz*, *Waltzes from Vienna* is a triumph.

This brief preamble of rather testy observations only serves to emphasize that *Frenzy*, Alfred Hitchcock's latest film, is indeed triumphant in almost every way, and it is a cause for jubilation among those who admire suspense-thrillers. It is filmed in the London of today, but without the "trendy" atmosphere of the Beatles-Twiggie mob. It is, rather nostalgically, the enduring, everyday London of Covent Garden, Tottenham Court Road and the Embankment—a sunny London, really, where commonplaces of traffic, banalities and dignities of language and behavior can camouflage the activities of a savage rapist-strangler who compulsively snuffs out the lives of women by day or night. Armed only with a necktie, the murderer terrorizes the city, with nonchalant, incurable dementia.

What delights and chills the spectator is the splendid casting. Although Jon Finch's introduction to American audiences was not entirely disappointing, his rather stilted Macbeth in the Polanski film does not prepare us for the ambiguous portrait of a maladjusted ex-RAF flyer named Richard Blaney. In this role, Finch is quite convincing as he trudges through what seems to be a thoroughly dead-end route to thwarted hopes and ultimate penury. Having

been fired from his barman's job by an insupportable employer, Blaney roams the streets, ignoring the news headlines about the necktie murders, and oblivious to a detailed psychological conversation in a pub between two men who analyze the personality of the murderer. Later, when Blaney angrily chastizes himself on the street for not being able to follow up a racing tip that had paid off in large winnings, the musical score suddenly bursts forth, and one knows at once that the stage is set for dark deeds. Once the suspense is established—the knowledge of Blaney's penchant for uncontrolled violence—scriptwriter Anthony Shaffer and Hitchcock never release the tensions until the final sequence.

Although several murders are committed during the film, Hitchcock only permits us one graphic sequence of mayhem, a testament to the demands of today's horror film genre. One remembers the cinematic technique from *Strangers on a Train*, in the party sequence, where Robert Walker jokingly pretends to strangle one of the lady guests, a particularly prim British dowager. Here, in *Frenzy*, the position of the camera is the same, concentrating primarily on the victim's face and throat, with the necktie sinking into the folds of flesh. No tricks, only the excruciating, gurgling descent into death that evokes astonishment and dismay on the part of an audience. Again, in comparison to the earlier film, the victim, although younger and attractive, is a very decorous, self-confident British type, well-coiffed and impeccably groomed, so that her ravishing has an even more profound piteousness about it. Her helplessness while sub-



mitting to the attacker's desires is acutely dramatized by having her recite some prayerful poetry as she distractedly, involuntarily pulls her disarranged brassière over an uncovered breast.

Hitchcock's underlying indictment against society in *Frenzy* is, it seems, the general tendency of people not to want to be involved in troubles of any kind. The camera reflects this dispassionate attitude in two notable moments: after the first murder, the camera remains on the street below. The victim's body is discovered offscreen and we hear a scream. Two young girls, engrossed in conversation, stop for a second, then move on. The camera later follows the murderer and a prospective victim up the stairs of an apartment building and they enter a flat, the door closes, and in almost stealthy silence, the camera moves slowly down the stairs again and out into the loud noise and bustle of traffic. It is brilliantly discreet, and chilling as well. The major character of noninvolvement is exemplified by the cameo portrait of a hostile wife, Hetty Porter (Billie Whitelaw). Her husband tries to help Blaney hide from the police, out of their friendship during wartime, but Hetty's unshakable mistrust is persuasively presented, finally conquering her husband's divided loyalties.

In fact, all of the characters seem *real*. Barbara Leigh-Hunt's depiction of Blaney's divorced wife is totally sympathetic and yet indicative of a certain wilfulness and ambition that would alienate a man of Blaney's disorganized temperament. Her beauty is in the glossy tradition of the Hitchcock blonde, but rather softened here to fit the middle-class milieu and one's identification *with* the story. On the other hand, Anna Massey, as "Babs" Milligan, a barmaid who is in love with Blaney, is a superb, original creation, almost Dickensian in effect. She is completely without pretensions, sensible and although tough, just a bit guileless. Miss Massey succeeds in being the season's most unlikely and lovable heroine, with a perky-bird earthiness all her own.

It would not be possible for Alfred Hitchcock to restrain his sense of humor, and in *Frenzy*, most of it is given to Alec McCowen as Inspector Oxford, who, in the course of investigation of the necktie murders, is encumbered in his

home life by a wife who experiments with French cuisine. The sequences in which Mrs. Oxford (Vivien Merchant) serves outrageous dishes to her husband are not only filled with plot information (sometimes redundant), but most intriguingly, packed with some of the best facial expressions, subtle delivery of lines and superb comic timing to be found in Hitchcock since Radford and Wayne in *The Lady Vanishes*.

Hitchcock's big scene in *Frenzy* involves the murderer's frenetic effort to regain a damning piece of evidence from the fist of a corpse. Unfortunately, the corpse has been placed upside down in a sack of potatoes, and any effort to describe this sequence further is a futile gesture, for it is Hitchcock's brilliance, his innate genius for this sort of suspense that will keep these moments alive forever. It is at the beginning of this sequence, however, that one's attention is drawn to Ron Goodwin's excellent score. The mordant melody takes on a slow waltz tempo as the murderer moves from the street to the flat—weaving with beautiful, sinuous calm before the moment of terrified remembrance. It is coincidental but thrilling to feel the association with a waltz-tempo and the murderous impulse in both *Frenzy* and *Shadow of a Doubt* (although Cotten's victims were all merry widows). The theme has been heard earlier, dramatizing Blaney and his plight, but the sudden shift in musical mood at this point gives the film a depth of emotion that is an understated, sonorous enrichment of the audience's responses to the murderer's personality.

Frenzy, then, is Hitchcock's return to the realm he commanded so long: the fears and excitement felt when viewing and hearing the stories of a diabolical narrator. Shaffer should work with Hitchcock again, and it is a pity that they are not collaborating on the film version of *Sleuth*. Two final delights in the film were recognizing a similarity to the ending of *Dial M for Murder* (the play, not the film) used here, with its uncomplicated, terse finale, and in the middle of the film, suddenly seeing Elsie Randolph as a wary hotel employee, casting a baleful eye at the hero, as if she were about to sing from one of her old musicals—"You've Got the Wrong Rhumba."
—ALBERT JOHNSON